# Developing Gridlock: Frames of Contestation at the World Trade Organization

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**Abstract**

Although international inter-governmental organizations (IGOs) are frequently characterized as "gridlocked," the meaning, variation, and drivers of gridlock remain under-theorized. Building on the concept of rhetorical contestation and the impact of exogenous shocks, this article offers a new theoretical framework to define and explain IGO gridlock. It uses the World Trade Organization (WTO) as an important example in which gridlock reflects contestation between two competing ways to rhetorically frame the WTO's purpose: Trade (reciprocation) vs. Development (redistribution). Contrary to conventional wisdom, we predict that exogenous shocks (such as economic crises or leadership changes in key states) cannot be relied upon to end gridlock. Rather, in the aftermath of exogenous shocks, gridlock is likely to intensify as governments express frustration with one another, fixate on procedures, and "double-down" on their preferred rhetorical frame. We test our prediction with computational text analyses on an original dataset encompassing all transcripts between 1995 and 2020 from the Committee on Trade and Development (CTD), the WTO's focal point for discussions of the trade/development nexus. First, tracking the prevalence of frustration words establishes gridlock's presence and variation. Second, topic modeling distinguishes discussions of procedures and substance, showing that governments tend to sidetrack into procedural squabbles after exogenous shocks. Third, examining subtopics within substantive discussions demonstrates the importance of the competing Trade Frame and Development Frame to particular governments, as well as a lack of bridge-building across frames after exogenous shocks. In addition to providing insights into the trade/development nexus, these findings refine the gridlock literature and link it with previously unconnected work on rhetorical contestation.

**Keywords:**

gridlock, governance, World Trade Organization, rhetoric, contest, frame, trade, development, reciprocation, redistribution, topic, United States, China

## Introduction

In recent decades, scholars and policymakers have bemoaned the "gridlock" in various international inter-governmental organizations (IGOs).[1] For instance, the continuing failure of the World Trade Organization (WTO) to complete its ongoing negotiations round—which began in 2001 in Doha, Qatar—has prompted multiple commentators to identify the WTO as a gridlocked IGO.[2] Yet the precise nature of gridlock in IGOs remains poorly understood: it is unclear whether gridlock is a permanent or temporary situation, and it is unclear what might make gridlock increase or decrease over time. As evidenced by periodic apparent progress in IGOs,[3] gridlock actually waxes and wanes, meaning that it is not a simple binary present-or-absent feature.

Using the World Trade Organization as an important example of an ostensibly gridlocked IGO, we offer a new theoretical framework to define and explain gridlock. Building on the concept of rhetorical contestation and the impact of exogenous shocks, we point out that gridlock within the WTO reflects contestation between two competing ways for member-governments to rhetorically frame the organization's purpose: Trade (and the reciprocation it prescribes) versus Development (and the redistribution it prescribes). We predict that in the short-term aftermath of exogenous shocks (such as international economic crises), gridlock among member-governments will rise. This prediction contradicts conventional wisdom, which presumes shocks lead to compromises that end gridlock. What the conventional wisdom misses, however, is that shocks 1) often empower a newer rhetorical frame, but without eliminating an older one, and 2) make governments' audience(s) more attentive, but not necessarily more discerning or single-minded. Consequently, exogenous shocks actually diminish incentives for member-governments to compromise. In seeking to lay blame for, protect themselves against, or take advantage of shocks, IGO member-governments face reasons to express frustration with one another, fixate on procedures, and "double-down" on their preferred rhetorical frame. In other words, exogenous shocks increase IGO gridlock.

We test our prediction with computational text analyses of all 1995-2020 transcripts from the Committee on Trade and Development (CTD), the WTO's focal point for discussions of the trade/development nexus. The research design has three parts. First, tracking the prevalence of frustration words establishes gridlock's presence and variation. Second, topic modeling distinguishes discussions of procedures and substance, showing that governments tend to sidetrack into procedural squabbles after exogenous shocks. Third, examining subtopics within discussions of substance demonstrates the importance of the competing Trade Frame and Development Frame to particular governments, as well as a lack of bridge-building across frames after exogenous shocks.

Our findings advance the literature on several fronts. Using text-as-data tools to operationalize gridlock and extract multiple levels of rhetorical frames, we bring novel theoretical insights to bear on questions of the origins, persistence, and variation of IGO gridlock. In addition to providing insights into the trade/development nexus, our findings refine the gridlock literature and link it with previously unconnected work on rhetorical coercion. Our operationalization of gridlock fits the context of international politics, captures variation, and can be applied to many international institutions. And by offering a better understanding of how

[1] Hale et al. 2013.

[2] E.g., Collier 2006; Narlikar 2010; Faude 2020.

[3] Brazys and Panke 2017; Held et al. 2019.

gridlock emerges and can be affected by exogenous shocks, our work also can be of great value to policymakers struggling with gridlock in a wide variety of IGOs.

The paper proceeds in four sections. First, we present our theoretical framework: building on the concept of rhetorical coercion, we refine and operationalize gridlock, then develop the counter-intuitive prediction that gridlock will increase in the short-term aftermath of exogenous shocks. Next, we introduce our original dataset (which encompasses detailed transcripts from all CTD meetings within the WTO between 1995 and 2020) and explain our empirical methodology. Then, we employ text search and topic modeling to test our prediction about exogenous shocks. Last, the conclusion examines theoretical and policy implications.

## I. Theoretical Framework

In international politics, gridlock is an important but under-theorized concept. We point out the fruitfulness of seeing gridlock as the flipside of coercion in rhetorical contestation: it occurs when attempts at rhetorical coercion cycle, rather than triumphing. Seen this way, gridlock becomes more predictable, because its relationship to rhetorical frames, an audience, and exogenous shocks is more obvious. After discussing how two rhetorical frames—a Trade Frame whose policy implication is reciprocation, and a Development Frame whose policy implication is redistribution—play out for the audience of the World Trade Organization, we develop a generalizable way to operationalize gridlock for IGOs and then hypothesize how exogenous shocks will affect IGO gridlock.

### Gridlock

In recent years, scholars and practitioners have characterized various bodies of global governance as gridlocked.[4] According to one prominent book on the topic, gridlock means being enmeshed in a self-reinforcing interdependence in which institutions, through the very act of solving some of the initial problems they were designed to address, bring about new problems that they prove unable to address.[5] Put more generally, gridlock is a situation in which uncompromising factions counter and block one another, thereby immobilizing the forum in which these factions interact.

Researchers have suggested at least four (sometimes-overlapping) reasons for gridlocked global governance.[6] First, when actors initiate a pattern of cooperation with one another, they are inclined to start with the most solvable problems. Over time, therefore, the problems that remain are a more challenging lot. Second, in the years since the post-World War II creation of the contemporary "liberal world order," both the numbers and the types of global governance bodies have mushroomed. The traditional inter-governmental arrangements that originally typified the order are no longer the only available forums. Third, the international system has morphed from the Cold War's bipolarity, to the United States' brief unipolarity, and now to multipolarity. While relations between the U.S. and China garner a great deal of attention, other major players—the European Union (EU), India, and others—matter too. Fourth, part of the rationale behind international inter-governmental organizations is to institutionalize particular ways of doing things. Unsurprisingly then, IGOs tend to change more slowly than their environments, and they may struggle to deal with the harder problems, the more complex system of global governance, and the larger number of influential countries that their environments now

[4] E.g., Faude 2020; Rewizorski et al. 2020.

[5] Hale et al. 2013, 10.

[6] Hale et al. 2013, 277.

present.

Such explanations are a commendable start, but they face several problems. For one thing, they are entwined with the passage of time. Since the late 1940s, there has been no counterfactual world in which the simplest problems were saved for last, or the numbers and types of global governance bodies consolidated, or the distribution of state power shifted from multipolar to bipolar, or IGOs were kept un-institutionalized. Thus, the reasons above are tough to disentangle from one another, from the aging of global governance, and from any other factors that are correlated with time.

Relatedly, while these explanations for gridlock largely march in a single direction over time, gridlock itself varies. For instance, some old institutions are not seen as gridlocked, while some young institutions are.[7] It is problematic if the outcome of interest waxes and wanes, but the proposed explanations do not.

Furthermore, conceptual work has outpaced empirical work. Numerous studies have claimed that gridlock plagues international institutions—such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change or the World Trade Organization.[8] However, these studies rarely carry out large-scale, systematic tests of a precise causal pathway by which proposed factors (e.g., institutional proliferation or rising powers) produce gridlock. What is more, such studies do not present a shared definition of gridlock, nor do they strive to operationalize gridlock in a general way that would apply to many types of institutions working in diverse policy areas.

Unfortunately, drawing from work on domestic politics to operationalize gridlock is infeasible. For domestic politics in democratic countries, gridlock often is estimated by counting the number of laws a legislature passed in a given year, then checking whether the number is lower than in the preceding year or lower than an average across several years. That approach is problematic even in a domestic context,[9] but it certainly does not fit the international context, where IGOs and other institutions are charged with many different tasks, are not necessarily structured to be "democratic," and might not produce legislation per se.

What international relations research needs is an operationalization that can apply to a variety of IGOs, ascertaining whether and when international institutions are experiencing gridlock. The operationalization must capture variation and be more nuanced than a binary present-or-absent cutoff. We develop such an operationalization of gridlock by building on the idea of "rhetorical contestation": different ways of portraying and responding to the world's circumstances.

## Rhetorical Contestation

For national governments, the forums provided by IGOs are sites for rhetorical contestation.[10] Indeed, much of the gridlock that scholars and practitioners perceive in IGOs is less about technical issues than political ones. That is, IGOs become immobilized not because technical solutions are non-existent, but because—to at least some consequential sets of governments—the technical solutions are politically non-palatable, and/or do not address what those governments portray as the key political problem. Gridlock occurs when different factions of states engage in rhetorical contestation and, despite failing to rhetorically "coerce" each other,

[7] Lall 2017.

[8] Kemp 2016; Faude 2020.

[9] Binder 2004.

[10] Johnston 2001; Chelotti et al. forthcoming.

nevertheless keep attempting it.

***The Importance of Rhetoric and Rhetorical Contestation***

As Jean-Jacques Rousseau's classic admonition notes: "The strongest is never strong enough to be always master, unless he transforms strength into right and obedience into duty."[11] In political contests to attract allies and get their way, not all national governments are equally endowed with material resources, but even those that command vast material resources also need to "frame" their activity, explaining the purposes to which their material power is put.[12] Rhetoric, therefore, is an important political tool of both the strong and the weak.[13]

Perhaps in a perfect world, governmental statements would be free from political maneuvering. In an idealistic mode of communicative action, discourse would be an exercise in ignoring power and rank, uncovering the truth, being open to persuasion and correction, and reaching consensus.[14] But in reality, actors "do not leave their identities at the door when entering into dialogue, and they do not employ language unadulterated by earlier political contestation."[15] Hence, rhetorical devices are deeply political.

Ronald Krebs and Patrick Jackson model rhetorical contestation in a way that "explicates the power of rhetoric even when politics is *not* truth-seeking and truth-generating" and also "includes *all* speech, no matter how interlaced with power relations."[16] Their model incorporates the reality that rhetoric can contain both sincerely held beliefs and disingenuous strategic claims. Moreover, in their model there is no need to pinpoint people's motives and try to distinguish between the two.

This is because Krebs and Jackson explore rhetorical *coercion*: situations in which one actor uses discourse to maneuver another actor into a corner, trapping it into endorsing a position it may, or may not, find anathema. For this, unobservable interior beliefs and motives are beside the point. Instead, it is the observable rhetorical contestation—what actors say, and how they respond to claims and counter-claims—that matters.[17]

Krebs and Jackson's stylized model of rhetorical coercion contains three roles: in view of an Audience,[18] Actors 1 and 2 each direct toward one another an argument in support of some policy move each wants produced.[19] Any argument contains two analytically separable parts. One is the *frame*, a set of terms characterizing the issue at hand. The other is the *implication*, a

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[11] Rousseau 1968.

[12] Krebs and Jackson 2007, 38.

[13] Gamson 1992; Schimmelfennig 2001.

[14] Habermas 1984.

[15] Krebs and Jackson 2007, 39-40.

[16] Krebs and Jackson 2007, 40.

[17] Krebs and Jackson 2007, 42.

[18] We substitute the broader term "Audience" for the original term "Public" in order to avoid the impression or claim that all laypeople are actively observing international politics. When interacting in IGOs, governments' audience could be all laypeople, but usually it is only subsets of the public (journalists, domestic policymakers, epistemic communities, interest groups, etc.). The term "Audience" better reflects the fact that the theory does not hinge on observation by the entire global public.

[19] The model accommodates a variety of contexts. For instance, each of the three roles could be an individual, a small group, or a large group. Furthermore, Actor 1 and Actor 2 could share control over the issue at hand (e.g., if they are two political parties within a domestic legislature) or one actor could have exclusive control over it (e.g., if Actor 1 is a citizen and Actor 2 is the national government). All that matters is the other actor's accession or resistance being in some way pivotal to the outcome (Jackson and Krebs 2007, 43).

set of prescriptions that (according to the Actor) follow from the frame.[20] Actor 1, interacting rhetorically with Actor 2 in view of the Audience, may agree or disagree regarding its counterpart's frame, or implication, or both. The same is true for Actor 2.[21]

Expressing different implications is a relatively narrow conflict in which both actors articulate the same frame, but not the same suggested policy prescriptions. Such conflicts could be overcome with education, technical experts, etc. Expressing different frames, on the other hand, is a bigger conflict in which the actors fundamentally dispute one another's characterization of the underlying problem. Through frames, actors "locate, perceive, identify, and label."[22] Frames give meaning to events and limit the range of acceptable responses.[23] When Actors 1 and 2 disagree about rhetorical frames, they diverge not only about the policy move but about "the very terms of debate."[24]

The framing choices made by the two actors, as shown in Figure 1, shape whether any policy agreement will be expressed.[25]

***Figure 1: Actors' Agreement or Disagreement over Rhetorical Frames***

| | | **Actor 2** | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | **Frame A** | **Frame B** |
| **Actor 1** | **Frame A** | expressed policy agreement | continued rhetorical contestation |
| | **Frame B** | continued rhetorical contestation | expressed policy agreement |

Krebs and Jackson are focused on the top-left and bottom-right cells: rhetorical interactions that result in expressed policy agreement. Their central insight is that when actors who initially used different frames later use the same frame, it may be due to one actor's successful persuasion, but it also may be due to one actor's successful coercion—*and distinguishing between persuasion and coercion is neither feasible nor crucial*. It is not feasible because seeing inside actors' hearts and minds is impossible, and it is not crucial because the expressed policy agreement itself is interesting. The authors illustrate this sort of cessation of rhetorical contestation with a case study of Druze Arabs who repeatedly spoke of their service in Israel's military and eventually succeeded in getting Israel's government to grant them greater

[20] Krebs and Jackson 2007, 43.

[21] Some recent scholarship parallels this frame/implication distinction by discussing disagreements over justification/action (e.g., Stimmer 2019, 270) or validity/applicability (e.g. Weinhardt and ten Brink 2020, 266), but we maintain Krebs and Jackson's original terminology.

[22] Goffman 1974, 21.

[23] Stimmer 2019, 272.

[24] Krebs and Jackson 2007, 44.

[25] Weinhardt and ten Brink 2020, 264.

citizenship rights. Their illustration shows how rhetorical coercion can "twist arms by twisting tongues."[26]

***Gridlock as the Flipside of Successful Rhetorical Coercion***

Yet for our purposes, what are of interest are the less-explored outcomes at Figure 1's bottom-left and top-right: continued rhetorical contestation. Here, neither actor accepts the other's frame. However, since silence could permit a precedent that produces unwanted obligations, the actors keep talking. Thus, the forum in which Actor 1 and Actor 2 interact becomes both animated and immobile: there is plenty of discourse, but the actors repeatedly talk past one another rather than agreeing on substantive policies.

This—although Krebs and Jackson never use the word—is gridlock. Gridlock is the flipside of successful rhetorical coercion: it occurs when actors' attempts at rhetorical coercion are cycling, rather than triumphing. Successful rhetorical coercion occurs when one actor, concerned about repercussions from the Audience, accepts another actor's frame and/or implication even if not genuinely persuaded of their goodness. This results in expressed policy agreement. But rhetorical coercion is hardly guaranteed. Thus, instead of triumphing, attempts at rhetorical coercion may end up cycling. The result is gridlock, as the two actors persist in continued rhetorical contestation, without expressing substantive policy agreement.

To understand gridlock, it is therefore important to note the two conditions that Krebs and Jackson say are needed for rhetorical coercion to succeed.

First, in countering each other's frames, the available rhetorical options must be more limited for one actor than the other. Discursive communities possess rhetorical "commonplaces" (i.e., shared understandings among people) that both constrain and assist actors' rhetorical possibilities.[27] Although Actor 1 and Actor 2 can utilize these existing commonplaces in creative ways, they cannot abandon them entirely, or else their arguments would be too alien for the Audience. Rhetorical innovation happens regularly over time. However—absent some sort of disruption or crisis—rhetorical innovation is unlikely to occur rapidly, because the process of transforming novel rhetoric into a commonplace is costly and risky.

The second condition for successful rhetorical coercion is that the Audience must truly be relevant. An actor's coercive potential lies in being able to credibly threaten to get the Audience on its side; without this, its counterpart can simply ignore or talk past its argument. This condition will not be satisfied if the Audience is not paying attention, or if one actor can block or distort the argument that the other actor aims at the Audience. It also will not be satisfied if, rather than being a single entity with a shared understanding of appropriate rhetorical moves, the Audience is composed of fragmented groups—and Actor 1 may be playing to some, while Actor 2 plays to others.

Thus, Krebs and Jackson hint that attempts at rhetorical coercion may cycle (rather than triumph) if neither actor has a clear advantage in rhetorical commonplaces from which to draw, and/or if the Audience is inattentive, confused, or fragmented. The latter condition, in particular, compels the authors to anticipate that "rhetorical coercion will operate less effectively and less frequently in international settings [compared to domestic ones]."[28] The existence of a truly global public—a tightly linked worldwide community possessing a shared sense of appropriate

[26] Krebs and Jackson 2007, 42.

[27] Shotter 1993, 170-171.

[28] Krebs and Jackson 2007, 55, 56.

political discourse—is debatable.[29] Instead, when national governments interact in the forums provided by IGOs, they often try hardest to appeal to their own domestic audiences.

In addition to having some spatial separation between one another, those domestic audiences also differ in who is watching the actors most closely. To make this more concrete, momentarily think of Actor 1 as the United States and Actor 2 as China. For China, the managers of state-owned enterprises would be a more relevant portion of the audience than the leaders of labor unions would be. For the United States, the opposite would be true. Such fragmentation of the Audience makes it difficult for either actor to trap the other in a "gotcha" moment: where the opponent endorses a position that it may find anathema, and nevertheless is pushed by audience costs to carry out. The audience costs are most acute if the Audience is attentive, discerning, and single-minded. But since those three attributes do not always exist simultaneously for domestic politics, and international politics is domestic politics in aggregate, the audience costs for international politics are likely to be dampened.

All of this means that unless the available rhetorical options are more limited for one actor than the other, and the Audience is truly relevant, attempts at rhetorical coercion will cycle—resulting in gridlock. Although Krebs and Jackson focus on Figure 1's cells of non-gridlock, their two conditions hint that gridlock can be broken if some shock to the system closes off rhetorical options *and* captures the Audience's attention. If true, then in the aftermath of exogenous shocks, gridlock would subside.

***Why International Gridlock Would Increase (Not Subside) After Exogenous Shocks***

Extending Krebs and Jackson's framework to reason that international gridlock would subside after a shock is intuitively appealing, but it would involve two problematic assumptions. One relates to the first condition about rhetorical options. True, an actor with access to fewer rhetorical options is more likely to find itself verbally endorsing (or at least acquiescing to) the other actor's stance—regardless of whether the disadvantaged actor has actually been persuaded to believe what it is uttering.[30] If, for whatever reason, one actor is more limited in being able to draw from established commonplaces, the other actor can more easily outmaneuver it, anticipating and depriving materials it would need for socially sustainable rhetorical contestation. A shock (such as a financial crisis or a leadership change in a key state) certainly is a juncture at which rhetorical innovation can accelerate, rapidly establishing a new commonplace.

But that does not automatically make the old commonplace disappear. Instead, the newer and older rhetorical options may co-exist. This presents the actors with more (not fewer) options—thereby intensifying (not ending) rhetorical contestation. The possibility is especially relevant in international politics, where, even as a newer commonplace arises, there are many pockets in which an older commonplace can persist.

Another problematic assumption relates to the second condition about the Audience's relevance. Yes, a shock often heightens the Audience's attention and demands for policy changes. And national governments, for their part, may conclude that an effective response will require buy-in from a foreign or global audience.

But while shocks do tend to make the Audience more attentive, they do not necessarily make the Audience more discerning or single-minded. This is true for a domestic Audience that

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[29] Nanz and Steffek 2004.

[30] Krebs and Jackson 2007, 36, 44, 45, 46, 47. Note that the Audience does not have to possess a well-reasoned *a priori* position, but there must be bounds on the sets of arguments that the Audience would find minimally acceptable.

mixes various interests—and even more true for an international Audience that mixes governments' disparate domestic contexts. Krebs and Jackson broadly acknowledge that the social environment for international politics is more complicated than the social environment for domestic politics,[31] and therefore shocks would not necessarily operate identically.

We offer deeper insight: by repositioning particular states or interest groups as winners, losers, culprits, or victims, shocks often activate nationalistic or narrow mindsets. Instead of figuring out how a compromise would permit everyone to gain something, such mindsets fixate on who would gain more. In unresolved rhetorical contestations, this would diminish incentives to compromise, thereby intensifying gridlock.

Gridlock is different from disengagement. If one actor disengaged and kept quiet, that actor's silence could permit a precedent that produced unwanted obligations. Therefore, even when Actor 1 and Actor 2 have conflicting rhetorical frames that hinder substantive policy agreement, they keep up the rhetorical contestation by continuing to talk.

So, what would they talk about? There are three main veins:

1) *Expressions of Frustration*: conveying annoyance about the other actor or the impasse.

2) *Procedural Matters*: diverting to non-substantive issues concerning jurisdiction, processes, etc.

3) *Rhetorical Frames*: trumpeting the preferred rhetorical frame on substantive issues, without building bridges to the alternative frame.

In other words, gridlock is a situation in which there is plenty of discourse but—rather than agreeing on substantive policies—Actor 1 and Actor 2 repeatedly talk past one another.[32]

Thus, although Krebs and Jackson emphasize how rhetorical contestation can be brought to a close in domestic forums, we build on under-explored parts of their model to explain how rhetorical contestation can continue to churn in the international forums provided by IGOs. When states persist in contesting not just implications but also the underlying rhetorical frames, global governance bodies experience gridlock. Contrary to what much work on international politics suggests, gridlock does not automatically intensify over time; it can wax and wane. And contrary to what some work on domestic politics suggests, shocks in the international system can increase—rather than end—gridlock.[33] This is because international shocks often activate nationalistic or narrow mindsets, making compromise less likely. In seeking to lay blame for, protect themselves against, or take advantage of shocks, IGO member-governments face incentives to express frustration with one another, fixate on procedures, or double-down on their preferred frame in rhetorical contestation.

**Two Rhetorical Frames and Their Policy Implications**

In extreme situations, exogenous shocks elevate newer rhetorical frames that may challenge older ones.[34] One of the most serious systemic shocks of the past several decades

[31] Krebs and Jackson 2007, 56.

[32] Stimmer 2019, 272.

[33] Donnelly 2021.

[34] Krebs and Jackson 2007, 46.

came in the early 1990s, with the sudden end of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. Prior to this, the planet had been separated into a so-called "First World" (the United States' sphere of influence, based in North America and Western Europe), a "Second World" (the Soviet Union's sphere of influence, based in Eastern Europe), and a "Third World" (places that the two superpowers either vied for or ignored, largely in what is now the Global South). In addition to creating more space for the Global South to be a player in IGOs, the abrupt end of bipolar rivalry also reinforced a new frame that had been percolating since the 1960s and 1970s: *developmentalism*.

***The Development Frame and One-Way Redistribution***

The notion of developmentalism portrays global poverty as a problem that must be solved not only by poorer countries but also by richer ones—perhaps because poorer countries were exploited in the past by richer countries, or at least because richer countries now have the wherewithal to assist poorer countries. Originally pushed by countries of the Global South through initiatives such as the New International Economic Order (NIEO) or the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), developmentalism gained momentum as the number of countries from the Global South swelled. Following waves of decolonization that turned developing areas into independent states, developing countries came to outnumber developed countries within many IGOs. If they could operate in a unified way, they could exert greater pressure on traditional powers.[35]

Eventually, developmentalism became an important rhetorical frame not only in economic institutions such as the World Bank, but also in the United Nations system more generally. Numerous IGOs espoused "policy coherence," by which institutions across a variety of policy areas (e.g., health, education, trade) would direct efforts toward reducing global poverty. The aim of reducing global poverty even touched the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), an IGO that traditionally served rich countries only.[36]

Although developmentalism had been around long before the early 1990s, the United States' ostensible victory in the Cold War gave the notion at least two boosts. One was economic: the Soviet Union's socialism suddenly looked much less attractive than the United States' capitalism, and therefore international markets seemed to be the key to developing countries' future prosperity. The other boost for developmentalism was political: the remaining superpower was a vocal proponent of democratic principles, and therefore developing countries anticipated that they would now have much more of a voice in global governance bodies.[37]

The rhetorical frame of development—which portrays global poverty as a problem that richer countries are obligated to solve—carries a particular implication. With its emphasis on justice, developmentalism implies *redistribution* from richer countries to poorer ones.[38] Such redistribution could take the form of money, know-how, access, technology, etc. But the unifying thread is that all are one-way, not reciprocal.

***The Trade Frame and Two-Way Reciprocation***

The Development Frame and its policy implication of one-way redistribution is very different from an older rhetorical frame: the notion of states making trades. This "you-scratch-

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[35] Jawara and Kwa 2004, 182.

[36] Collier 2006, 1427.

[37] Collier 2006, 1426, 1427.

[38] Narlikar 2010, 720.

my-back-and-I'll-scratch-yours" mentality exists in a variety of international policy areas—everything from military alliances to postal standards, or from treatment of diplomats to management of natural resources. And of course, it is central to economic trade.

Following the economic depression of the 1930s and the devastating war of the 1940s, industrialized countries broadly agreed that the high tariffs they had been imposing on each other's imports were also hurting themselves. However, since unilateral reductions risked balance-of-payments problems, trade liberalization needed to be a synchronized and reciprocal undertaking. The United States signaled its dedication to this undertaking in 1934, when President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act (RTAA) into law.

With the authority granted by the RTAA, U.S. presidents negotiated reciprocal trade agreements with dozens of other countries.[39] The RTAA also facilitated U.S. participation in creating the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). Comprising only 23 governments when it began in 1947, the GATT forum largely served as a marketplace for industrialized countries to strike liberalization deals with fellow industrialized countries on an overtly *quid pro quo* basis.

As Western Europe recovered and integrated into what would eventually become the European Union (EU), and as Japan eventually remade itself into a manufacturing and technological dynamo, the United States' economic position was no longer unparalleled. But that actually facilitated bargaining: these three big players needed things from each other, and they could get what they needed by striking deals in a relatively small group. Since all three were major forces in trade, they could easily spot and punish each other's free-riding attempts. Thus, through reciprocation—and through the "Most-Favored Nation" principle by which deals struck among major players were also extended to and abided by other GATT parties—a series of negotiating rounds produced substantial trade liberalization, particularly regarding tariffs on manufactured goods.[40]

The Trade Frame—that states bargain with one another and make mutual (though perhaps unequal) concessions—carries a particular implication. With the emphasis on reaching deals, trade implies *reciprocation*. States' concessions to each other do not need to be identical in kind or even size, but they are expected to be two-way.

**How This Plays Out in the World Trade Organization**

The World Trade Organization is an example of an IGO in which these competing rhetorical frames interact. The Trade Frame, with its policy implication of reciprocation, had dominated in the WTO's predecessor, the GATT system. In a series of negotiating rounds beginning in the 1940s, major states took the lead in progressively lowering tariffs in the manufacturing sector, and then began addressing additional sectors and trade barriers. By the Tokyo Round that finished in 1979, GATT negotiations had slashed many "at the border" tariffs and had begun tackling more complex "behind the border" issues such as government procurement, subsidies, and technical requirements.[41]

But the 1970s also witnessed the formalization of two devices allowing some GATT members to bypass reciprocation. One device was to refer to the policies determined in the Tokyo Round not as "rules" but as "codes." Governments could (and did) pick which codes they

[39] Bailey et al. 1997.

[40] Collier 2006, 1424-1425.

[41] Faude 2020, 450-451. The agricultural or primary commodities sectors, which tended to be important to poorer countries but protected by richer countries, experienced less liberalization.

would follow. A second device was "Special and Differential Treatment." Although many of the developing countries that exist today were not parties to the GATT at first, that was changing by the 1970s. Through the new formalization of Special and Differential Treatment, developing countries were not required to adhere to all bargains struck in GATT negotiating rounds and did not have to reciprocate the preferential treatment that richer countries chose to extend to them.[42] However, by opting into this arrangement, developing countries also were marginalized: they were not full participants in the bargaining process.[43] The alternative track of Special and Differential Treatment, as well as the optionality of the Tokyo Round codes, countenanced exceptions to the Trade Frame and the reciprocation it implied.

No alternative rhetorical frame and implication was fully positioned yet. However, a window was opening for future rhetorical contestation, partly due to the methods by which the GATT expanded. Essentially, existing signatories considered a prospective member's economic significance, its competitiveness in salient sectors, and/or its powerful patrons, then agreed on an "entry price." A higher "price" meant that the prospective member needed to satisfy more detailed or more intrusive demands in order to join. Some prospective members—especially newly independent states backed by their former colonial overseers—did not need to jump through many hoops. Others faced long and costly accession processes. But both sets of prospective members had reason to regard the accession process as a *fait accompli* that ignored their own preferences, or even worked against them.[44]

***The Co-Existence of the Trade Frame and the Development Frame***

The next set of GATT negotiations, the Uruguay Round, took place from 1986 to 1993. This round culminated in the decision to create a full-fledged IGO, the World Trade Organization. The WTO would help to administer the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, plus numerous new agreements covering issues such as services, agriculture, and intellectual property. In April 1994, 123 governments signed the Marrakesh Agreement Establishing the WTO.

In adjacent paragraphs in the preamble of the Marrakesh Agreement, governments portray the new IGO through the previously-dominant Trade Frame and also through a contrasting Development Frame. One paragraph uses the Development Frame but refers obliquely to "positive efforts" rather than specifying that frame's implication of one-way redistribution:

> [T]here is need for positive efforts designed to **ensure that developing countries**, and especially the least developed among them, **secure a share** in the growth in international trade **commensurate with the needs of their economic development**.[45]

Then, the next paragraph uses the Trade Frame and explicitly endorses that frame's implication of two-way reciprocation:

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[42] In addition, developed countries could grant concessions to developing countries without having to treat the rest of the membership similarly (Jawara and Kwa 2004, 12).

[43] Collier 2006, 1424-1425. The formalization of Special and Differential Treatment built upon the GATT's Part IV, which was added during the Kennedy Round of negotiations and entered into force in 1966.

[44] Wilkinson 2018, 424.

[45] Marrakesh Agreement preamble, paragraph 2, emphasis added. Available at: https://www.wto.org/english/docs_e/legal_e/04-wto_e.htm

> [We desire to contribute] to these objectives by entering into **reciprocal and mutually advantageous arrangements directed to the substantial reduction of tariffs and other barriers to trade** and to the elimination of discriminatory treatment in international trade relations.[46]

Thus, the governments who negotiated the creation of the WTO attempted to thread the needle by specifying the policy means (reciprocation) by which to achieve two policy ends (trade and development).[47]

Since the negotiations creating the WTO concluded soon after the shock of the Cold War's end, it is unsurprising that the Marrakesh Agreement incorporates developmentalist rhetoric. The Development Frame benefited from the twin boosts noted above. Politically, the democratic principles trumpeted by the world's remaining superpower gave rise to the expectation that less-powerful countries would now have more voice in global governance. Economically, the ostensible victory of capitalism over socialism suggested that international markets could bring prosperity.

The Marrakesh Agreement contains traces not only of the Trade Frame inherited from the earlier GATT, but also the Development Frame transported from the World Bank and the United Nations system.[48] When the WTO began operating in 1995, it was clear that the remaining trade liberalization was overwhelmingly about developing countries: developing countries accessing developed countries' markets, developing countries opening their markets to developed countries, and developing countries opening their markets to one another.[49] In stark contrast with the earlier GATT, the WTO has a near-global membership; developing countries vastly outnumber developed ones; and some of the main economic powers are from the Global South.[50]

However, co-mingling the Trade Frame and the Development Frame within the WTO risks gridlock, due to a clash between the frames' policy *implications*. Some WTO members joined the organization "not to take part in a marketplace, but to participate in a purposive and redistributive agency."[51] Particularly to the developing countries that have not experienced rapid economic growth, the reciprocation implied by the Trade Frame makes little sense. After all, they have little to offer to the marketplace. Meanwhile, they have much to lose in the form of previously granted Special and Differential Treatment, and they may have joined the WTO not to endorse liberalization but to avoid marginalization.[52]

Figure 2 contrasts the two frames. The Trade Frame prescribes bargaining, mutual concessions, two-way reciprocation. The Development Frame prescribes redistributive justice,

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[46] Marrakesh Agreement preamble, paragraph 3, emphasis added. Available at: https://www.wto.org/english/docs_e/legal_e/04-wto_e.htm

[47] In fact, another paragraph in the preamble complicates things even further by specifying that trade should support development that is *environmentally sustainable*: "seeking both to protect and preserve the environment and to enhance the means for doing so" (Johnson 2015; Johnson and Urpelainen 2020).

[48] Indeed, several developing countries (e.g., Cuba, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Malaysia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe) soon formed the Like-Minded Group (LMG) within the WTO and became known for their developmentalist views in trade negotiations (Jawara and Kwa 2004, 24).

[49] Collier 2006, 1426.

[50] Hopewell 2016. Emerging economic powers such as Brazil, China, and India have relied on forms of state-led development that have downplayed the importance of liberalizing markets and have been emulated by other developing countries (Faude 2020, 452).

[51] Collier 2006, 1448.

[52] Collier 2006, 1428-1429.

resource transfers, and one-way redistribution. In short, while the Trade Frame maintains that concessions come at a price, the Development Frame contends the price was already paid.

***Figure 2: Contrasting the Trade Frame and the Development Frame***

| **Trade Frame** | **Development Frame** |
|---|---|
| Source: General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) system | Source: World Bank and the United Nations system |
| Emphasis: bargaining and mutual concessions | Emphasis: justice and resource transfers |
| Policy Implication: two-way reciprocation between richer and poorer countries | Policy Implication: one-way redistribution from richer countries to poorer countries |

With tensions between the two rhetorical frames, gridlock occurs. To understand gridlock, think of WTO members as "Actor 1" and "Actor 2." This is flexible: it could capture developed and developing countries as groups, or reduce to major powers such as the United States and China. Depending on whether the actors use the same rhetorical frame, Figure 3 depicts whether to expect expressed policy agreement, or just prolonged rhetorical contestation.

***Figure 3: Actors' Convergence or Divergence on the Trade or Development Frames***

| | | **Actor 2** | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | **Trade Frame** | **Development Frame** |
| **Actor 1** | **Trade Frame** | expressed policy agreement involving *two-way reciprocation* | continued rhetorical contestation (gridlock) |
| | **Development Frame** | continued rhetorical contestation (gridlock) | expressed policy agreement involving *one-way redistribution* |

If both actors embrace the Trade Frame (top-left), their expressed policy agreement involves that frame's implication of two-way reciprocation. Or, if both actors embrace the Development Frame (bottom-right), their expressed policy agreement involves that frame's implication of one-way redistribution. But if the two actors embrace different frames (top-right or bottom-left), there is continued rhetorical contestation—in other words, gridlock.

Recall that in the agreement establishing the WTO, both the Trade Frame and the Development Frame receive nods. This reflects governments' Uruguay Round discussions, which were informed by not only the legacy of the GATT, but also the transformations taking place in the World Bank and the United Nations system. The WTO's founding document more explicitly endorses the Trade Frame's policy implication. Nevertheless, it provides rhetorical toeholds to both the "pro-reciprocation" and the "pro-redistribution" governments within the WTO's membership. From its beginning, then, the World Trade Organization has provided ripe conditions for gridlock and continued rhetorical contestation.[53]

***Shocks' Impact on Gridlock***

Gridlock and frame contestation are possible for the WTO at any time, given the competing nods to the two main frames that are present in the founding documents. However, we anticipate that the WTO can be pushed into greater gridlock in the immediate aftermath of exogenous shocks—i.e., acute international crises or leadership changes, particularly those that revolve around the United States or China. These two states are crucial for global governance in general and for the WTO in particular. After all, the United States is the traditional trade leader of the post-World War II order, whereas China appears to be the most revolutionary development success of recent decades. In fact, China—with its dedication to and success with state-led development—is often at odds with the United States' traditional notions of market liberalization.[54]

But that does not mean gridlock within the WTO is constant.[55] Indeed, we argue that gridlock increases following shocks. That is because shocks can reduce the likelihood of rhetorical coercion. In seeking to lay blame for, protect themselves against, or take advantage of shocks, IGO member-governments face fewer incentives to compromise. Shocks activate nationalistic or otherwise narrow mindsets that impel states to express frustration with one another, fixate on procedures, or double-down on their preferred frame in rhetorical contestation.

In the WTO's lifespan from 1995 to today, several such shocks have occurred:

- China's full-fledged WTO membership (2002)
- The global financial crisis originating from the U.S. economy (2009)
- Xi Jinping's assumption of China's presidency (2013)
- Donald Trump's assumption of the United States' presidency (2017)
- The COVID pandemic first identified in China (2020)

Each of the five disruptions or crises noted above can affect rhetorical coercion—and conversely, gridlock.

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[53] For example, to explain why some developing countries hindered the Doha Development Round that began in the WTO in 2001, one study muses, "Rather than allowing themselves to go on being swindled time and time again, they would serve their people better by finally standing up to the bullying of the major powers" (Jawara and Kwa 2004, 267).

[54] Kobayashi 2013; Narlikar 2019.

[55] For example, focusing on Chinese officials' WTO rhetoric and behavior related to three sectors, a recent study concludes that China's contestation within the WTO is not invariable. Specifically, China was found to have engaged in more frame contestation when negotiating about agriculture or steel than when negotiating about information technology. In fact, in the negotiations that produced an expansion of the WTO's Information Technology Agreement (ITA), China was an active participant who accepted both the Trade Frame and its implication of two-way reciprocity (Weinhardt and tem Brink 2020).

***Hypotheses***

To recap: gridlock is the flipside of successful rhetorical coercion. It occurs when, rather than coalescing on a rhetorical frame, Actor 1 and Actor 2 persist in using different frames. Their discourse continues, but instead of reaching substantive policy agreement, the actors repeatedly talk past one another. In particular, in their discourse they convey annoyance, fixate on non-substantive issues concerning jurisdiction or processes, or trumpet one preferred rhetorical frame without building bridges to the alternative frame.

In the context of the World Trade Organization, gridlock would entail rhetorical contestation between two rhetorical frames that received nods in the WTO's founding agreement: the Trade Frame prescribes reciprocation, whereas the Development Frame prescribes redistribution. From its beginning, the WTO has provided ripe conditions for rhetorical contestation. However, we anticipate that exogenous shocks—in particular, China's full-fledged WTO membership (2002); the global financial crisis originating from the U.S. economy (2009); Xi Jinping's assumption of China's presidency (2013); Donald Trump's assumption of the United States' presidency (2017); the COVID pandemic first identified in China (2020)—increase gridlock. Such shocks can prompt governments to elevate contestation over compromise, at least temporarily.[56]

As such, gridlock can be operationalized and measured by looking at the words and topics that governments employ in their rhetorical interactions. With the usual *ceteris paribus* stipulations, this points to three hypotheses:

> ***Hypothesis 1: Expressions of Frustration***
> In the short-term aftermath of an exogenous shock, the topics that governments emphasize will be *more* permeated with expressions of frustration.
>
> ***Hypothesis 2: Procedural Matters***
> In the short-term aftermath of an exogenous shock, the topics that governments emphasize will be *more* fixated on procedural (rather than substantive) matters.
>
> ***Hypothesis 3: Rhetorical Frames***
> In the short-term aftermath of an international disruption or crisis, within discussions of substantive matters, the sub-topics that governments emphasize will be *more* likely to trumpet one preferred rhetorical frame, without building bridges to the alternative frame.

As time passes after a shock, we expect gridlock to wane. Governments' statements would contain fewer expressions of frustration, less preoccupation with procedural matters, and less dogged adherence to a single rhetorical frame. Within about two years, we anticipate that governments will have returned to a "baseline" of sorts, because shocks increase gridlock only temporarily.

## II. Data and Methods

To probe these hypotheses, we construct an original dataset using transcripts from all governmental negotiations within the Committee on Trade and Development (CTD) of the World Trade Organization (WTO), between 1995 and 2020. The CTD is a hard case for our hypotheses. Launched immediately after the WTO began operating in January 1995, it is an

[56] This effectively represents the opposite of the conditions for persuasion outlined in Johnston 2001, 499.

international forum for discussing the nexus of trade and development.[57] That is, its *raison d'être* is to wrestle with the existence of, and tension between, two very different rhetorical frames: a Trade Frame (with its policy implication of reciprocation) and a Development Frame (with its policy implication of redistribution). If the CTD exhibits gridlock not only waxing but also waning, and if the variation corresponds with exogenous shocks as we predict, this establishes our theoretical framework's plausibility and generalizability. In other IGOs, different rhetorical frames may be more pertinent—but our core insights about gridlock's operationalization and variability are likely to hold.

**Data: Texts from the WTO's Committee on Trade and Development (CTD)**

Below, we describe our methodological approach of text search and topic modeling. First, though, it is important to explain the CTD and illustrate governments' rhetorical contestation within it. The CTD institutionalizes and expands discussions that had begun in the previous GATT system, and it reports directly to the WTO's General Council.[58] Since all governments in the WTO's nearly global membership can participate, it is a site of interaction among diverse countries.[59]

A chairperson, elected from among member-government representatives, leads each CTD meeting. The Chair handles administrative issues and cedes the floor to governments wishing to speak. Chairs hold office for one calendar year; during that period someone else must represent their own government's interests during discussion, for chairpersons are prohibited from doing so. General topics to be covered in a given meeting are shaped in advance by the CTD's terms of reference, the rotating Chair, and the member-governments. Yet even with a meeting's general topics shaped in advance, governments still have significant leeway in what they talk about.

Like many international forums, WTO bodies use a one-country-one-vote system, with major decisions requiring consensus. Consequently, each government "matters" in the CTD and has incentives to participate in discussions. The CTD can issue non-binding recommendations, but explicit votes on binding policies are reserved for WTO general meetings. For our purposes, being one step removed from binding policies is advantageous: there is less motivation to speak disingenuously in order to sway an immediate voting outcome.

The CTD meets regularly, three or four times per year. That means many opportunities—across countries, across time—to examine governments' rhetoric.[60] Importantly, the regularized schedule ensures that meetings showcase governments' interactions but are not *driven* by those interactions: for instance, the group does not convene only when governments are in conflict.

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[57] CTD Terms of Reference. January 31, 1995. Available at: https://docs.wto.org/dol2fe/Pages/SS/directdoc.aspx?filename=q:/WT/L/46.pdf&Open=True

[58] In particular, in the GATT system the predecessor of today's CTD was involved in a 1979 decision to allow exceptions to the Most-Favored Nation principle if developing countries received preferable treatment from developed countries or from one another. For more information, see: https://www.wto.org/english/docs_e/legal_e/enabling1979_e.htm

[59] Since most but not all members are governments of nation-states, WTO materials encompass members such as Hong Kong by carefully referencing "member-governments" rather than "member-states." In line with political science parlance, however, here we sometimes use the term "state" or "country" as shorthand for WTO members.

[60] CTD meetings are divided into regular sessions and special sessions. To ensure comparability, we use minutes only from regular sessions ( documents beginning with the tag "WT/COMTD/M"). The minutes are available at: https://docs.wto.org/dol2fe/Pages/FE_Search/FE_S_S006.aspx?Query=(%20@Symbol=%20wt/comtd/m/*%20)&Language=ENGLISH&Context=FomerScriptedSearch&languageUIChanged=true#

The WTO Secretariat makes CTD meeting minutes publicly available on the WTO website, in English, in a standardized format.[61] The minutes are detailed: starting with the first meeting, all statements are not only transcribed but also attributed to the governments making them. In the 1995-2020 period there are 113 meeting minutes, each containing scores of statements. Since our interest is in the actors who actually have decision-making power within the CTD, we retain only the statements made by member-governments.[62] This results in the textual corpus to be analyzed.

In transforming this textual corpus into a dataset, a speaker-turn becomes the unit of analysis, with each change in speaker signaling a separate observation. Thus, if the representative of State X speaks at four different points in a given meeting, each of the four is an observation. Using speaker-turn as the unit of analysis is superior to considering all of a given government's utterances as a single observation. Speaker-turn reflects the discussions' dynamism: how governments respond to one another with their rhetorical frames, topics, words, and references. This captures the reality that statements made by a single government can contain different content or can serve different functions at various points within a single meeting. Focusing on speaker-turns associated with state delegations in the 1995-2020 period results in 5,115 observations. The majority of speaker-turns are one paragraph long.

The data contain diverse governments, with nearly every WTO member speaking in the CTD. Nevertheless, some governments do make more statements than others, reflecting the differences in power and discourse control that are well known in domestic and international politics.[63] The top speakers include Canada, China, Egypt, the European Union, India, and the United States.[64] In fact, some evidence suggests that China-Egypt-India comprise one bloc, while Canada-EU-US comprise another: there are frequent mutual references within these triads, including a relatively common pattern in which a statement by one government is followed by supportive statements from the other two. The empirical analysis will examine these triads further.

**Topic Modeling Methodology**

Having constructed our dataset of CTD texts, we use text search and topic modeling to probe the three hypotheses. Text search is relatively straightforward. But topic modeling is more complex and therefore warrants further explanation.[65]

The intuition of topic modeling is that quantitative techniques help generalize from qualitative data sources. A "topic" is considered a distribution over a fixed vocabulary, with the presumption that authors/speakers knew their topics when generating their texts.[66] Topic modeling builds from a word-document matrix in which each document (here, a speaker-turn), is reduced to a single vector containing the frequency count of each word the document contains. That is, the columns list all the documents, the rows list all the words, and the cells contain the

[61] Minutes are available in PDF, Word, or Word Perfect. With format conversion software, we converted all to plain text.

[62] For example, the dataset does not include statements made by the rotating Chair, the WTO Secretariat, or representatives of other IGOs. It also does not include reference materials that were appended to meeting minutes.

[63] Panke 2017.

[64] The countries comprising the European Communities/Union have a single representative, the European Commission.

[65] For an even deeper discussion of topic modeling, see Johnson and Lerner 2021 (including its appendix).

[66] Blei 2012, 78-80.

frequencies with which each word appears in each document. This matrix enables comparisons of documents.[67]

Topic modeling is a form of machine-learning that is "unsupervised." This term does not mean humans are uninvolved; it just permits greater exploration by computers. Whereas supervised models focus human effort on training the computer to replicate things; unsupervised models focus human effort on interpreting what the computer uncovers.[68] Here, the computer is permitted to identify whatever topics exist—and not just the topics that human researchers dictate. This is important because, even though we expect a Trade Frame and a Development Frame to be important features in the data, the existence of these two rhetorical frames should be tested, not assumed.

We employ a specific approach, a Structural Topic Model (STM). The STM is derived from Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), the most common form of topic modeling. Using a Dirichlet distribution and observable word frequencies, LDA makes inferences about unobservable "latent" topics that gave rise to observed word use. LDA's input is a word-document matrix, and its output is a set of estimated probabilities that each document is composed of each topic.[69] Since the probabilities sum to 1 for each document, the probabilities are like estimates of the *proportion* of each document that is composed of each topic. This, too, is important for our context: in addition to trying to distinguish governments that favor a Trade Frame and those that favor a Development Frame, we must allow for the possibility that a government apportions a single speaker-turn to both rhetorical frames. Although human close-reading of the texts can spot speaker-turns that do not fit neatly into a single topic, only the computer can precisely quantify the underlying proportions.

This LDA framework is further innovated in a Structural Topic Model, which also allows document-specific covariate data to define distributions for word use within a topic. That is, in addition to being a "mixed membership" model in which a single document can contain more than one topic,[70] it also enables covariate data—including document metadata—to capture cross-speaker variation in prevalence (the frequency with which a topic is discussed) or content (the words used to discuss a topic).[71] This improves on estimation in general and permits our data to retain more of its richness.[72] For instance, a control variable for a government's geographic region would allow for the possibility that governments in Europe discuss a topic less frequently, or that governments in Africa are less likely to use a particular word when discussing a topic.[73]

## III. Analysis

Our theoretical framework and empirical approach mitigate gaps in the existing literature on gridlock. For one thing, we challenge conventional wisdom by explaining why, rather than ending gridlock, exogenous shocks could temporarily increase it. In addition, we present falsifiable hypotheses that operationalize gridlock in a general way that can be applied to numerous IGOs. Furthermore, by examining words and topics that governments employ in

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[67] Grimmer and Stewart 2013.

[68] Lucas et al. 2015, 261.

[69] Blei et al. 2003.

[70] Blei 2012, 83.

[71] Roberts et al. 2014.

[72] Blei and Lafferty 2007.

[73] For additional variables, such as the income level and region of a delegate's country, we use the World Bank classification and data from their API (accessed via the *wbstats* R package).

rhetorical contestation, we capture variation in IGO gridlock, disentangling this key concept from the one-way march of time.

**Hypothesis 1: Expressions of Frustration**

We begin by testing Hypothesis 1, which predicts that in the short-term aftermath of international shocks, governments' use of frustration words will increase. Specifically, we examine the prevalence of frustration words following five shocks: China's full-fledged WTO membership (2002); the global financial crisis originating from the U.S. economy (2009); Xi Jinping's assumption of China's presidency (2013); Donald Trump's assumption of the United States' presidency (2017); the COVID pandemic first identified in China (2020).

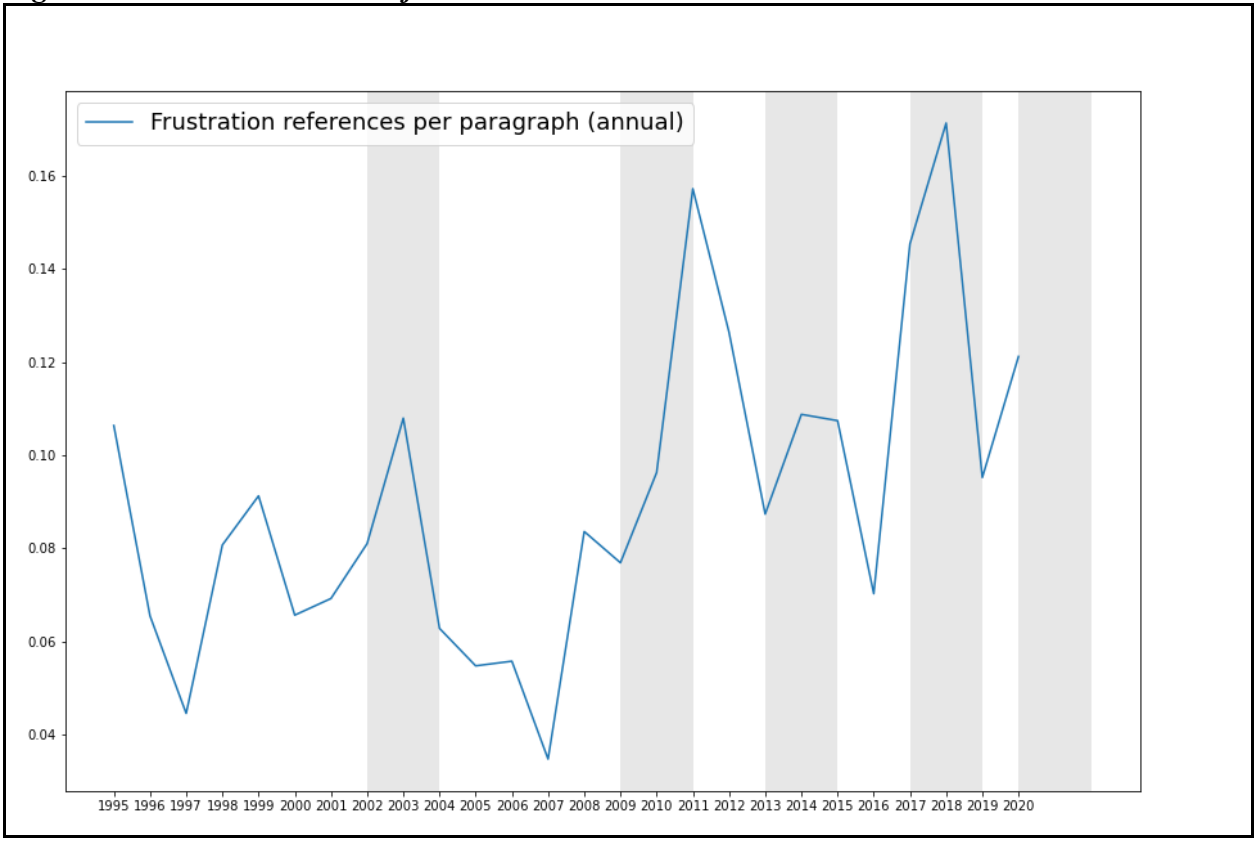
To measure the presence of frustration in CTD discussions, we identify various types of frustration related to gridlock: concern over repetition, long duration, lack of progress, delays, disappointment, opposition, or lack of clarity. Then, supplemented by human close-reading of the underlying texts, we identify specific words or phrases expressing these various types of frustration. Figure 4 shows the words, with an asterisk (*) indicating any wildcards that permit related roots.

***Figure 4: Words or Phrases Indicating Frustration***

| **Type of Frustration** | **Words / phrases** |
|---|---|
| Repetition | once again, reiterat*, remind*, repeat*, repeti*, previous occasions |
| Long Duration | many years, several years, continue* to have concerns |
| Lack of Progress | little progress, no progress, little prospect, no prospect, something new to |
| Delays | delay*, distract*, neglect* |
| Disappointment | regret*, disappoint* |
| Opposition | disagree*, friction, unacceptab*, antagon* |
| Lack of Clarity | unclear, opaque |

Using these words and phrases related to frustration, we then calculated their prevalence in the CTD data, on an annual basis. Figure 5 shows the year-by-year variation in the prevalence of frustration words.

***Figure 5: Governments' Use of Frustration Words Varies across Time***




In line with our conceptual point that gridlock does not automatically increase over time, but instead can wax and wane, the prevalence of frustration words fluctuates during the 1995-2020 period. This demonstrates the importance of disentangling gridlock—or at least, frustration with perceived gridlock—from the simple passing of time. With gray bands, Figure 5 highlights the two-year periods following each of the five shocks. The data show that frustration words peak in the short-term aftermath of the shocks, strongly supporting Hypothesis 1.

To get a deeper sense of these peaks in frustration, consider examples from the CTD's meeting in July 2018, the year after Donald Trump's assumption of the United States' presidency. In an "intervention" in the meeting, the Chair began by referring to a short 2015 proposal—by Barbados, Belize, China, Cuba, Ecuador, India, and the African Group—for the CTD to be the WTO's focal point for development.[74] The proposal had asked the WTO General Council to instruct the CTD to report on development-related work occurring in other WTO bodies and to make recommendations to the General Council about better intra-WTO coordination on development issues.[75]

India and China briefly spoke in support of the proposal. The representative of the United States immediately pushed back, emphasizing their proposal's age:

[74] In 2018, the CTD Chair was Diego Aulestia of Ecuador.

[75] WTO document code WT/COMTD/W/208; full text available at: https://docs.wto.org/dol2fe/Pages/SS/directdoc.aspx?filename=q:/WT/COMTD/W208.pdf&Open=True

> The proponents themselves had failed to take any initiative to advance their ideas for **several years**. They needed to address the concerns raised by other Members—either by revising their proposals, or by dropping the proposals altogether. Either way, the sub-items concerning these proposals needed to be removed from the CTD's agenda until the proponents had **something new** to say. Her delegation had **repeatedly** stated that there was no consensus for these items to remain on the agenda as standing items, as if there was unfinished business to address. She also pointed out that, at several meetings, the Chair had had to actively solicit acknowledgment of the item from the proponents.[76]

The representative of the European Union echoed the United States' concerns and chided the proposal's proponents for being unresponsive:

> Her delegation **continued** to have concerns with the proposals that remained under consideration, as they did not respond to [the need for focus], and were not in line with the [8th WTO Ministerial Conference's] mandate. She indicated her delegation's openness to engage with the proponents, and invited the proponents to consult with other Members between formal CTD meetings, as this might prevent a **repetition** of the same positions at each formal meeting.[77]

These excerpts complement Figure 4, demonstrating how the peaks in expressions of frustration actually play out in discourse among governments.

**Hypothesis 2: Procedural Matters**

Next we turn to Hypothesis 2, which also anticipates what happens in the short-term aftermath of international shocks. Specifically, the hypothesis predicts that the share of governments' speaker-turns on matters of substance declines. Put differently, shocks would exacerbate gridlock, as evidenced by a greater fixation on procedural matters about juridiction and processes.

To test this, we divide the textual data into two main topics, using a Structural Topic Model with a splined year covariate. Recall that this is an "unsupervised" approach: although we anticipate that the two main topics will correspond to procedural matters and substantive matters, we do not dictate this. Instead, we permit the computer to use algorithms and calculations to sort the data into whatever two topics it estimates to be most foundational; then, with human close-reading of representative statements, we determine appropriate labels. Delving into the underlying texts confirms that governments' speaker-turns can generally be classified into two broad topics. One is about trade and development issues, and we label it "substantive matters." Another is about the working of the CTD itself, and we label it "procedural matters."

To check the appropriateness of sorting the data into just two main topics, we examine the distribution of the estimated topic assignments within each speaker-turn. If the STM algorithm faces difficulty in classifying a piece of textual data into one topic or the other, the density of the estimates would peak in the middle of the distribution, around 0.5. But if the STM algorithm sorts the data with high confidence, the density of the estimates would peak on the sides of the distribution, around 0 and/or 1. The high-confidence situation applies here, as shown in Figure A1 in the appendix. As mentioned earlier, six governments (Canada, China, Egypt, the

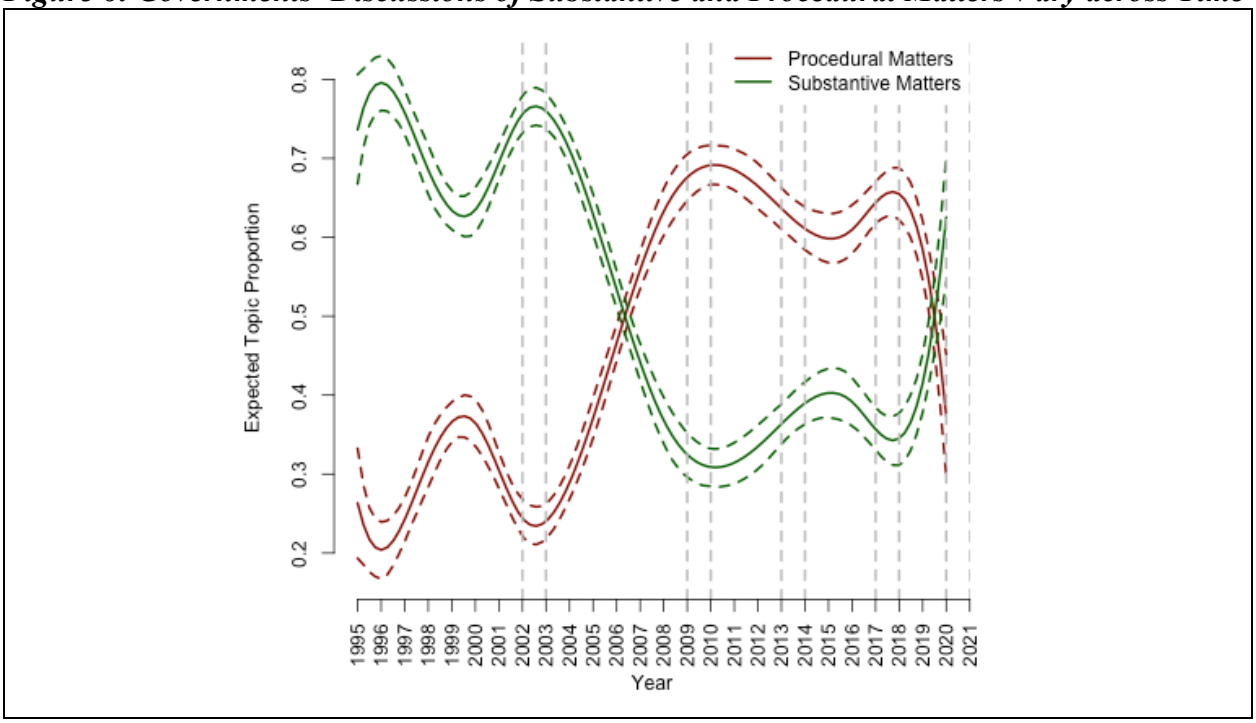
[76] WTO document code WT/COMTD/M/106, paragraph 53, emphasis added.

[77] WTO document code WT/COMTD/M/106, paragraph 54, emphasis added.

European Union, India, and the United States) are among the top speakers, so we first obtain estimates for all governments *other than* these six. This "Other" category clearly clusters around 0 or 1 in the distribution. Then, since some evidence suggests coordination among China-Egypt-India on the one hand and Canada-EU-US on the other, we also obtain separate estimates for those triads. Both triads also cluster around 0 or 1 in the distribution, further justifying the appropriateness of sorting the data into two main topics.

In the aggregate data, both topics are prevalent. About 60 percent of the corpus involves discussions of substantive matters, and the other 40 percent involves discussions of jurisdiction, processes, and other procedural matters. However, these overall numbers obscure variation over time. Indeed, as shown in Figure 6, the proportions fluctuate.

***Figure 6: Governments' Discussions of Substantive and Procedural Matters Vary across Time***




Substantive matters dominate in the CTD's early years. Then, shortly after China becomes a full-fledged WTO member (2002), the portion of CTD discussions devoted to procedural matters steadily climbs, reaching a peak soon after the global financial crisis that originates from the U.S. economy (2009). There is another uptick in procedural discussions following Donald Trump's assumption of the United States' presidency (2017).

To get a deeper sense of these upticks in discussing procedural rather than substantive matters, consider some more examples from the CTD's meeting in July 2018, the year after Donald Trump's assumption of the United States' presidency. When the Chair referred to a proposal (by Barbados, Belize, China, Cuba, Ecuador, India, and the African Group) for the CTD to report on and recommend how to coordinate the WTO's development work, the representative of the United States immediately pushed back. She protested that the proposal could not be discussed, for procedural reasons:

> She said that she wished to raise a point of order. She indicated that the issues that the Chairman was referring to did not pertain to any of the agenda items agreed for the present meeting. Her delegation had therefore not had the opportunity to prepare for a discussion on these issues. If the Member that had raised these issues at the last meeting wished to discuss them in the CTD, an agenda item would need to be requested for a future meeting.[78]

Eventually, after a brief suspension of the meeting and a reiteration of procedural concerns, the representative of the United States allowed the proposal to be discussed.

The meeting continued, with the Chair answering a few questions from a previous meeting. Then he ceded the floor to the representative of India, who emphasized the CTD as a focal point for the WTO's development work by reading aloud from the CTD's Terms of Reference.[79] The representative of Canada met this procedural move with one of her own:

> [She] did not believe that the CTD had the authority to require other WTO bodies to report to it, nor did it have the authority to provide recommendations to the General Council on the work undertaken by other bodies. She also observed that attempts to separate out the development-related aspects of other Committees' work would be challenging, and might trigger a theoretical debate about what constituted development. Additionally, such an approach could create a duplicative process—which would not be desirable in light of resource constraints—and might water down discussions through the absence of technical experts from the substantive Committees. In closing, she said that the end objectives of the proposal, and what exactly would be achieved, remained unclear to her delegation.[80]

This sequence of speaker-turns—from the United States, India, and Canada—displays governments getting no closer to a decision about the proposal. Instead, they fixate on procedural matters. First the United States tries to block any discussion, objecting that the proposal's authors did not follow the correct procedures for getting the proposal on the meeting's agenda. When that does not succeed, India merely recites the CTD's Terms of Reference, rather than making any substantive argument about how the proposal would actually work. Then Canada counters with a slew of procedural claims that the proposal goes beyond the CTD's authority, is duplicative, and unclear.[81] The proposal continued to appear on the CTD agenda for several more meetings, without resolution.

The upticks in procedural discussions—following China's full-fledged WTO membership (2002), the global financial crisis originating from the U.S. economy (2009), and Donald Trump's assumption of the United States' presidency (2017)—fit with our expectations. However, no strong uptick in procedural discussions occurs immediately after Xi Jinping's assumption of China's presidency (2013). And based on the available data, it appears that the COVID pandemic first identified in China (2020) actually resulted in more discussion of substantive matters, bringing procedural and substantive matters to account for even proportions

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[78] WTO document code WT/COMTD/M/106, paragraph 40.

[79] WTO document code WT/COMTD/M/106, paragraph 49.

[80] WTO document code WT/COMTD/M/106, paragraph 55.

[81] The full text of the 2015 proposal (WTO/COMTD/W/208) is available at: https://docs.wto.org/dol2fe/Pages/SS/directdoc.aspx?filename=q:/WT/COMTD/W208.pdf&Open=True

for the first time in about fifteen years. (Though, for a deeper look into how the May 2022 CTD meeting explicitly channeled governments into discussions of substantive rather than procedural matters, see the findings about Hypothesis 3 below.)

Thus, the evidence concerning Hypothesis 2 is mixed. The hypothesis is borne out by governments' greater preoccupation with procedural matters following the shocks of 2002, 2009, and 2017. However, the shocks of 2013 and 2020 do not increase gridlock as expected. One possible explanation is that—in line with economists who speak of China's accession to the WTO as "*The* China Shock," with even more far-reaching effects than China's leadership changes or pandemics[82]—China's full-fledged membership in 2002 may be an outsized shock, preventing other China-related shocks from reverberating as anticipated.

**Hypothesis 3: Rhetorical Frames**

Next we examine Hypothesis 3, which also anticipates what happens in the short-term aftermath of shocks. Specifically, the hypothesis predicts that, within discussions of substantive matters, the sub-topics that governments emphasize will be *more* likely to trumpet one preferred rhetorical frame, without building bridges to the alternative frame. Again, shocks are expected to increase gridlock.

To test this, we do a second step of structural topic modeling: focusing on the textual data that deals with substantive matters, we use another STM to sort that data into ten further sub-topics. Topic frequency is able to vary non-linearly by year, and the model also contains a control variable for whether a given unit of analysis is from the Canada-EU-US grouping, the China-Egypt-India grouping, or neither. This second STM is more granular, helping to identify the core rhetorical frames that governments use for matters of substance.

Like the first step, this is an unsupervised approach, with humans interpreting what the computer finds but not dictating what must be found. Instead of forcing the computer to look specifically for a Trade Frame and a Development Frame, we identify prevalent sub-topics and examine whether or how those sub-topics fit with the reciprocal notion of trade or the redistributive notion of development. Moreover, even though recent work finds that a strong predictor of behavior within the WTO is a country's development level,[83] we make no assumptions that governments from richer countries use a rhetorical frame of Trade or that those from poorer countries use a rhetorical frame of Development. All of this is to be probed, not presumed.

After permitting the computer to use algorithms and calculations to sort the data on substantive matters into whatever ten sub-topics it estimates to be most prevalent, we use human close-reading of representative statements to determine appropriate labels. This results in the following ten sub-topics: Vulnerabilities of Commodity-Dependent Economies, E-Commerce, Need for Technical Assistance, Requests for Regional Training Courses, Special Trade Provisions for Least-Developed Countries, Needs of Small Economies, Evaluations of Technical Assistance, Market Access, Endorsements and Expressions of Support, and Evaluations of Programs.[84] It is immediately apparent that six sub-topics—Vulnerabilities of Commodity-Dependent Economies, Need for Technical Assistance, Evaluations of Technical Assistance, Requests for Regional Training Courses, Special Trade Provisions for Least-Developed

[82] Autor et al. 2016, 2021.

[83] Johnson and Urpelainen 2020; Johnson and Lerner 2021.

[84] For the ten sub-topics' prevalence over time, see Figure A2 in the appendix.

Countries, and Needs of Small Economies—seem to be about one-way transfers, rather than two-way bargaining. This hints that in addition to a traditional Trade Frame (with a policy implication of reciprocation), some WTO member-governments probably are using a newer Development Frame (with a policy implication of redistribution).

It is likely that the Trade Frame and Development Frame are positively correlated with richer and poorer countries, respectively. Yet that is something to be investigated, not presumed, since governments' rhetorical framing could vary with numerous external or internal factors beyond a country's development level. To dig further, we need to identify rhetorical frames more directly—a non-trivial challenge, given that rhetorical nuances are most readily discernible by human close-reading, but our dataset contains thousands of speaker-turns.

Therefore, we use a middle-ground technique of hand-coding rhetorical frames in a sample of speaker-turns related to substantive matters. Specifically, we utilize Atlas.Ti software to inductively build a set of phrases employed in the Trade Frame and the Development Frame. The initial sample consists of 237 speaker-turns that most heavily load onto the ten "substantive" sub-topics, plus an additional 250 randomly sampled speaker-turns. The sample's two-part structure captures how the frames appear in highly significant observations, as well as in randomly sampled content that might be orthogonal to underlying sub-topics. For each of the sampled speaker-turns, we hand-code governments' use of a Trade Frame or a Development Frame (or neither).

The Trade Frame exhibits key words such as bargaining, market-opening, auditing, mutual, agreement, deal, in return, two-way, integration, reciprocity, etc. Induction from our sample suggests the overarching theme is that countries cannot, or must not, get something for nothing. Instead, concessions are to be mutual; favors are to be returned; programs are to be evaluated. In many speaker-turns using the Trade Frame, the focus is on integration of all WTO member-governments into existing programs.

In contrast, the Development Frame exhibits key words such as funding, capacity-building, assistance, transfer, aid, resources, inequality, poverty, justice, one-way, redistribution, etc. Induction from our sample suggests the overarching theme is that richer countries have a responsibility to address historical wrongs or misfortunes that have left other countries behind. In many speaker-turns using the Development Frame, the focus is on expanding WTO programs in order to target money, know-how, or other resources to struggling member-governments.

In our hand-coded sample, about 60% of the speaker-turns use a Trade Frame and about 30% use a Development Frame, while the remaining 10% use neither. This suggests that in discussing substantive matters, governments repeatedly employ these two rhetorical frames. Among the governments using the Trade Frame in our sample, the most frequent speakers are Canada, the European Union, Switzerland, and the United States. Although speaker-turns using the Development Frame are smaller in absolute quantity in our hand-coded sample, the number of different governments using the Development Frame is larger, with the most frequent speakers being Bangladesh, China, India, and Morocco.

With Named-Entity Recognition (NER), we can also pick up on governments referencing one another within their speaker-turns. For the immediate aftermath of the five shocks identified above, Figure 7 shows the changes in probability that a government will reference another government using the same rhetorical frame, the alternative frame, or neither.

***Figure 7: Following Shocks, There Is Not Much Bridge-Building across Rhetorical Frames***

| | | **Reference Target** | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Reference Source** | | Government Using Trade Frame | Government Using Development Frame | Government Using Neither Frame |
| | Government Using Trade Frame | +2 %-points | +1 %-point | -3 %-points |
| | Government Using Development Frame | +1 %-point | +8 %-points | -8 %-points |

Following shocks, there is not much bridge-building across rhetorical frames. Instead, there is some evidence of "rallying the troops": governments using the Trade Frame are slightly more likely to reference fellow governments that use the Trade Frame, and governments using the Development Frame are somewhat more likely to reference fellow governments that use the Development Frame. Moreover, both groups are less likely to reference governments that use neither of the two frames. These findings support Hypothesis 3.

It is important to note that the COVID pandemic—contrary to Hypothesis 3—is one shock whose immediate aftermath does display some bridge-building across rhetorical frames. However, it also seems to be an "exception that proves the rule": the first CTD meeting after the onset of the pandemic contains numerous governments displaying flexibility in their use of the Trade Frame and the Development Frame. But by another meeting just a few months later, governments had become entrenched in competing rhetorical frames.

To see the fleeting attempt at bridge-building, first consider examples from the CTD's May 2020 meeting. This meeting was unusual, because it had been postponed due to the pandemic, ended up being held virtually rather than in person, and spanned only a half-day. Furthermore, in advance the Chairperson (from Afghanistan) had informed governments that, instead of returning to pre-pandemic agenda items, he would encourage governments to "exchange views and experiences on the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the trade of developing countries."[85]

As a result, numerous governments employed both main rhetorical frames, often entwining them in a single speaker-turn. For example, the representative of Botswana first utilized the alternative Trade Frame to emphasize the threat that the pandemic posed to reciprocation and two-way bargaining:

> [He said that Africa, in general, was] heavily dependent on **imports** of pharmaceutical products and medical equipment, which were essential to combat COVID-19. As a net importer, African countries believed that emergency measures designed to tackle COVID-19, if deemed necessary, had to be targeted, proportionate, transparent, and temporary, and needed to be **consistent with WTO rules**. He called for an urgent and coordinated approach to **address trade restrictive measures**, so that such measures did

[85] WTO document code WT/COMTD/M/111, paragraph 1.

> not significantly affect African countries and their ability to **ensure access to essential goods** on reasonable and affordable terms.[86]

Next, the representative of Botswana reverted to the preferred Development Frame to emphasize the threat that the pandemic posed to redistribution and one-way transfers:

> The present crisis had exposed the **structural vulnerabilities** and wide **inequality** gaps in African countries. This underscored the importance of strengthening [**Special and Differentiated Treatment**] provisions to promote **inclusive** growth, and to ensure that the [multilateral trading system] was **responsive to the needs of developing countries** and [least-developed countries]. He stressed that [**Special and Differentiated Treatment] should not be regarded as a compromise, but rather as a necessity** to help address the challenges posed by global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.[87]

Thus, in quick succession, the representative of Botswana called for a pandemic response involving both two-way bargaining *and* one-way transfers.

Something similar happened with China, whose representative interspersed the alternative Trade Frame with the preferred Development Frame:

> On the **trade** front, China was endeavoring to **keep its market open**, and to **boost trade with its global partners**. The 127th China Import and Export Fair, which would take place online in mid-June, would create an international trade platform enabling foreign traders to remotely **promote their products** and **conduct business matching** with Chinese partners. Furthermore, the 3rd China International Import Expo would be held in Shanghai in November.
>
> On the **aid** front, China had provided anti-pandemic **donations** to 140 countries and international organizations, and had exported large quantities of anti-pandemic supplies to 189 countries and regions. In addition, China would provide USD 2 billion over 2 years to **help with COVID-19 responses and economic and social development** in affected countries, especially developing countries.[88]

In closing, the representative of China called on members to keep global supply chains open *and* to target technical assistance toward struggling states.

A few governments even eschewed their usual rhetorical frame and couched their statements in the alternative frame alone. For example, the representative of the United States adopted the Development Frame, emphasizing one-way transfers the US had made:

> She informed the Committee that, as of 1 May 2020, the United States Department of State and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) had committed more than USD 900 million in **assistance** to fight the pandemic **in the world's most at-risk countries**…. The United States was also providing **critical**

[86] WTO document code WT/COMTD/M/111, paragraph 9, emphasis added.
[87] WTO document code WT/COMTD/M/111, paragraph 10, emphasis added.
[88] WTO document code WT/COMTD/M/111, paragraph 11, emphasis added.

> **support to international organizations** fighting the pandemic, including the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Program (WFP), and dozens of other organizations. Despite the tremendous toll COVID-19 had taken on the United States in terms of lives lost and economic challenges, the United States was proud to be the **largest single donor** to the global response efforts, building on decades of leadership in life-saving health and **humanitarian assistance**.[89]

Despite usually promoting reciprocation, shortly after the onset of the COVID pandemic the representative of United States emphasized redistribution.

Conversely, the representative of Ecuador set aside its preferred Development Frame and utilized the alternative Trade Frame:

> She indicated that Ecuador's **trade** had been severely affected, both directly and indirectly, by the repercussions of COVID-19 and the containment measures applied by many countries. Ecuador's economy was dollar-based and relied on five **main sources of foreign exchange income**—which were trade, [foreign direct investment], tourism, remittances and, as a last resort, external borrowing…. In order to achieve sustainable and extensive economic recovery, it was vital to ensure renewed international commitment—based on global solidarity, and through the strengthening of a **transparent, predictable, non-discriminatory and rules-based [multilateral trading system]**.

Despite often promoting redistribution, in the immediate aftermath of the COVID pandemic the representative of Ecuador emphasized reciprocation.

But even during this extraordinary meeting in May 2020, not all governments built bridges between rhetorical frames. For example, the representative of Indonesia stuck to the preferred Development Frame:

> [He noted that] the **limited capacity and resources of developing Members** in fighting this pandemic was reason enough for the WTO to address the **needs** of these Members. In this regard, he believed that it was reasonable to expect **greater policy space and flexibilities** under rules relating to the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights, or other possible means, so as to ensure **equitable and affordable access** to medicines and medical devices in the context of the combat against the pandemic. Since the establishment of the WTO, the need for policy space had never been greater. He indicated in this regard that policy space **should not be seen as a disruption to competition in global merchandise trade, but rather as a lifeline to those in need**, particularly for health purposes. His delegation was of the view that these flexibilities should be targeted, proportionate, transparent, and temporary. He called on Members to prove that **development was still at the heart** of the WTO.[90]

Thus, the representative of Indonesia pointed to the pandemic as yet another issue that disproportionately hurt developing countries and required one-way concessions.

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[89] WTO document code WT/COMTD/M/111, paragraph 22, emphasis added.

[90] WTO document code WT/COMTD/M/111, paragraph 13, emphasis added.

In almost a mirror image of this, the representative of the European Union stuck to the preferred Trade Frame and foregrounded open markets and two-way benefits:

> [She said that] while the resulting fall in **commodity prices** had a disproportionate impact on developing countries, these countries were also struggling to source the necessary **raw materials** for key sectors of their own economies. This was why the European Union had emphasized the imperative of building sustainable and resilient **supply chains**…. [resting on] a bedrock of **predictable and transparent trade rules**. It was for this reason that the European Union continued to emphasize the need for a global solution based on a reinforced, **open, rules-based [multilateral trading system]**. This necessitated ensuring the role of the WTO as a focal point for transparency regarding any **trade-related measures** taken by Members to fight the pandemic. It was also for this reason that the European Union was pushing for a multilateral framework to facilitate **trade in essential medical supplies and protective equipment**.

Even while describing the EU's pandemic assistance, the representative of the European Union spotlighted what the EU aimed to get in return:

> [She noted that the EU's] "Team Europe" response package to COVID-19 included a total of EUR 23 billion to help developing countries preserve their **production and trading capacities**, as well as to support **growth and employment**. At the same time, the European Union was working with international organizations, partner countries, and the European private sector to build strong and resilient **value chains in strategic sectors**. In doing so, efforts were being made to ensure that sustainability, responsible business conduct, and **labor and human rights—as well as environmental standards**—were not only respected, but also became the **backbone of global recovery**.

Thus, the representative of the European Union pointed to the pandemic as yet another issue that necessitated bargaining and two-way benefits.

In fact, by the November 2022 CTD meeting, the limited bridge-building from the May 2022 meeting had been abandoned—suggesting it was an exception that actually underscores the strength of Hypothesis 3's prediction. Just a few months after the shock, governments had returned to their pre-pandemic agenda and were doubling-down on their previously preferred rhetorical frames. Once again, the agenda included the short 2015 proposal—by Barbados, Belize, China, Cuba, Ecuador, India, and the African Group—for the CTD to report on development-related work occurring in other WTO bodies and to make recommendations to the General Council about better intra-WTO coordination on development issues.

The texts echo how governments discussed the proposal back in 2018, following the shock of Donald Trump's assumption of the US's presidency: India and China again wielded the Development Frame, and the EU and the United States countered with the Trade Frame, complaining that the proposal's authors had made no attempt at two-way bargaining. The representative of India repeated the same points from past meetings.[91] The representative of China updated the argument a little, asserting that "the pandemic had disproportionately affected developing countries with limited resources and financial constraints, and it was therefore

[91] WTO document code WT/COMTD/M/113, paragraph 21.

important for more attention to be given to development issues in discussions at the WTO" through instruments such as the 2015 proposal.[92]

The representative of the EU responded that "there had been no changes in positions over the past few years [and] the proponents had not taken any initiative to contact other members informally to discuss a way forward."[93] Then, the representative of the United States closed by complaining:

> **Seven years** or more was sufficient time for the remaining proposals to have been fully considered by other Members. Moreover, the proponents had **failed to take any initiative** for several years to advance their ideas. It was time for the proponents to **address the concerns raised by other Members**—by revising their proposals, or by dropping the proposals altogether. Either way, the items **needed to be removed from the CTD agenda**, until the proponents had **something new** to say.[94]

Thus, despite the tremendous shock of the COVID pandemic, WTO member-governments found themselves re-entrenched in the competing rhetorical frames they had wielded after earlier shocks. With a few months' lagtime, Hypothesis 3 was borne out.

## IV. Conclusion

Building on the concept of rhetorical contestation and the impact of exogenous shocks, this article offers a new theoretical framework to define and explain IGO gridlock. It uses the World Trade Organization as an important example in which gridlock reflects contestation between two competing ways to rhetorically frame the WTO's purpose: Trade vs. Development. Contrary to conventional wisdom, we predict that exogenous shocks—such as economic crises or leadership changes in key states—cannot be relied upon to end gridlock. Rather, in the aftermath of exogenous shocks, gridlock is likely to intensify as governments express frustration with one another (Hypothesis 1), fixate on procedures (Hypothesis 2), and "double-down" on their preferred rhetorical frame (Hypothesis 3).

We test our hypotheses with computational text analyses on an original dataset encompassing all transcripts between 1995 and 2020 from the Committee on Trade and Development, the WTO's focal point for discussions of the trade/development nexus. First, tracking the prevalence of frustration words establishes gridlock's presence and variation. Second, topic modeling distinguishes discussions of procedures and substance, showing that governments tend to sidetrack into procedural squabbles after exogenous shocks. Third, examining sub-topics within substantive discussions demonstrates the importance of the competing Trade Frame and Development Frame for particular governments, as well as a lack of bridge-building across frames after exogenous shocks. Overall, there is mixed support for Hypothesis 2, and there is consistent support for Hypotheses 1 and 3.

The article makes theoretical, empirical, and policy contributions. From a theoretical standpoint, it demonstrates how IGO gridlock is the flipside of successful rhetorical coercion. By linking gridlock with previously unconnected work on rhetorical contestation, the conceptual framework is able to pinpoint some of gridlock's key markers and derive a counter-intuitive

[92] WTO document code WT/COMTD/M/113, paragraph 22.

[93] WTO document code WT/COMTD/M/113, paragraph 23.

[94] WTO document code WT/COMTD/M/113, paragraph 24.

expectation that exogenous international shocks are likely to exacerbate IGO gridlock, rather than end it.

In other words, we bring novel theoretical insights to bear on questions of the meaning, variation, and drivers of IGO gridlock. Our operationalization of gridlock fits the reality of international politics. Moreover, its aspects—such as rhetorical frames, procedural matters, and expressions of frustration—are general enough to apply to many international institutions.

Second, from an empirical standpoint, the article operationalizes gridlock in a way that permits this important concept to vary, not just increase. Unlike the literature's prominent explanations—such as the growing complexity of problems, the rise of new powers, the multi-polarization of the international system, or the aging of IGOs—our emphasis on exogenous international shocks is not as entangled with the march of time. Instead, both gridlock and its proposed driver can wax and wane.

After developing falsifiable hypotheses about the relationship between shocks and IGO gridlock, we test our hypotheses using computational text analyses on an original dataset of over 5,000 government statements from 1995 to 2020 in the WTO's Committee on Trade and Development. In conjunction with human close-reading of the underlying texts, the empirics support the hypotheses. This empirical support serves as encouragement to apply our theoretical framework to other international contexts where gridlock occurs. For example, parts of the United Nations system would be a fruitful place to start, with the set of relevant rhetorical frames adjusted to fit the specific context.

Third, from a policy standpoint, the article provides insights into the trade/development nexus and the perceived gridlock of the WTO. The lack of substantive policy agreements coming out of the WTO is a longer-standing issue than generally presumed. Moreover, it occurs not just because governments prefer different policy prescriptions, but because governments disagree about deeper rhetorical frames about whether the WTO's main purpose is to facilitate two-way bargaining (Trade) or one-way transfers (Development). Amidst such rhetorical contestation, traditionally weaker states are empowered—by their quantity within the WTO membership, as well as by rhetorical toe-holds in the Marrakesh Agreement that established the WTO—to prevent traditionally stronger states from focusing the IGO on trade policy alone, to the exclusion of development policy. However, because they are not sufficiently empowered to coerce the rest of the WTO membership to reorient solely around development policy, the IGO remains a forum for heated rhetorical contestation. The article's empirical results indicate that, unlike in some domestic forums, exogenous shocks are not guaranteed to bring gridlock to an end. Instead, partly due to the greater fragmentation of the audiences for IGOs, in the immediate aftermath of exogenous shocks, gridlock often increases.

In practical terms, our findings reinforce the notion that the WTO of the near future will be "minimalist."[95] Alternatives such as bilateralism, regionalism, or protectionism offer cheaper, quicker, and more populist alternatives than the multilateral WTO.[96] Tackling a narrowed set of sectors and issues, much of the organization's progress is likely to be intermittent,[97] occurring between exogenous shocks.

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[95] Weinhardt and ten Brink 2020, 241.

[96] Narlikar 2010, 724.

[97] Narlikar 2010; Hale et al. 2013; Hufbauer and Cimono 2013; Van Grasstek 2013; Elsig 2015; Hopewell 2016; Faude 2020; Rewizorski 2020.

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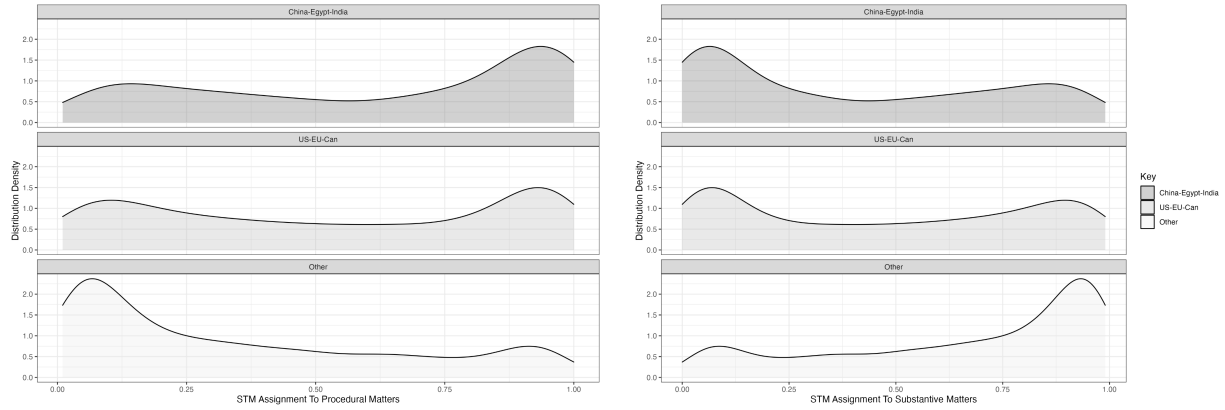
## Appendix

### Figure A1: The Reasonableness of Two Main Topics




The model is specified with topic proportion according to splined year.

**Figure A2: Main Sub-Topics in Substantive Statements, after Controlling for Groupings (Canada-EU-US, China-Egypt-India, or Neither)**